

Save Lives in Syria

It will be a tragic irony if the anti-ISIS Coalition, including Canada, ends up strengthening President Bashar Al Assad rather than saving his Syrian victims. Prime Minister Harper has signalled his government's willingness to expand Canada's participation beyond Iraq. Many lives can still be saved in Syria, the scene of the worst man-made humanitarian disaster in decades, but not by turning a blind eye to Assad's ongoing atrocities.

The sheer scale of the Syrian tragedy has numbed the world's conscience. Perhaps people feel that the conflict has become too complex and is too far gone for anything worthwhile to be done. Maybe humanity is just fatigued with a war for which there has been no entry strategy, never mind an exit strategy. Possibly, with the advent of ISIS, people think it safer not to get too involved and shrug at the infinitely greater jeopardy lived, and died, by others. Maybe people just care less when it is Muslims who are suffering. Whatever the explanation, the world has forsaken the innocents of Syria. The Responsibility to Protect has given way to the Disposition to Ignore.

While our collective gaze has been averted, the situation in Syria has deteriorated drastically. 2014 was the worst year yet; 76,000 people died there as a result of conflict, including 3,500 children, according to the London-based Syrian Observatory of Human Rights. The total Syrian death toll has climbed past 210,000. Well over 12 million people need humanitarian assistance just to keep body and soul together. 7.6 million people have fled their homes, some more than once (UNOCHA). Harsh winter conditions have compounded the crisis. A quarter of Syria's schools have been damaged, destroyed or taken over for shelter. More than half of Syria's hospitals are destroyed (UNHCR). Civilians are attacked indiscriminately by the Assad government and others and hundreds of thousands are cut off from food and medical resources by the fighting and by sieges.

Nearly four million Syrians have had the comparatively good fortune to find refuge in communities and camps in neighbouring Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan—at enormous cost to the host countries. In tiny Lebanon, refugees comprise nearly one-third of the population, the equivalent in Canada of an influx of the entire population of Ontario. According to the World Bank, the cost in terms of lost economic activity to the Lebanese economy of the Syrian crisis is vast—about \$8 billion. Jordan hosts over 622,000 Syrian refugees and large numbers of Palestinians as well. Turkey, the largest and richest of neighbouring countries, has absorbed over 1.6 million refugees, becoming the world’s biggest refugee hosting country; the number of refugees in Turkey is projected to rise to 2.5 million by year’s end. Beyond the negative impacts on the Turkish economy of lost trade and tourism revenues Turkey has spent more than \$6 billion on direct assistance to the refugees it is hosting (UNHCR)

In the main refugee-receiving countries, the extraordinary hospitality of the local populations is fraying under the pressures of the disproportionate burden they are bearing. Competition between refugees and locals over housing, jobs, health care and education is destabilizing. Many locals feel Syrians are responsible for reductions in their incomes and rises in rents, food costs, unemployment and crime. After years in exile, refugees' savings are long since depleted and people are resorting to begging, theft, survival sex and child labour. Millions of children are suffering from trauma and ill health.

Prime Minister Harper has signalled an intent to broaden the ambit of the Canadian mission against ISIS to include Syria. What should the international community and Canada also do to alleviate the great suffering there?

First, stanch or at least slow the bleeding. If the US-led coalition can muster the will to use air power to help stop ISIS in Iraq and in Syria, it can stop the barrel-bombing and other air-launched atrocities of the blood-soaked

Assad regime. Two no-fly zones were successfully imposed on Iraq from 1992 to 2003 after the first Gulf war, and saved countless lives. Something similar could be done vis-à-vis Syria using Turkish, Kurdish and other regional air bases. Canada could provide aircraft as we are doing in the coalition effort against ISIS.

Second, support the program recently agreed to by Turkey and the US to train selected moderate members of the Free Syrian Army in Turkey, far from the front lines, in order to combat ISIS and ultimately the Assad regime. Canada is already helping to train Kurdish Peshmerga forces but more needs to be done to cope with ISIS and ultimately with Assad.

Third, contribute more generously to the UN's humanitarian assistance programs for Syrian residents and for Syrian refugees. In 2014, only about 60% of the UN's request for \$5.9 billion (US) in aid was met by international donations. "Unfulfilled" donor commitments forced the World Food Program to suspend food aid to 1.7 million Syrian refugees in December. The same month, the UN launched a new appeal for 2015, at \$8.4 billion the largest ever (UNHCR). The US has been by far the largest donor, and Canada ranked a reasonable fifth among donor countries, providing about \$685 million (Cdn) cumulative since the crisis began in 2011. Using the UN's sliding scale for contributions, Canada's share in 2015 would be about \$250 million.

Fourth, permanently re-settle those Syrian refugees best able to adapt to life beyond the Middle East. With no political solution in sight, and with death and devastation awaiting returnees to Syria, many have no prospect of returning home. The world has pledged to provide shelter to 80,000 refugees (UNHCR), with Germany leading with 30,000, followed by the US, Brazil and Switzerland. Canada has committed to take 10,000 refugees by 2017. We could progressively increase our quota to approach the greater inflows we successfully integrated in past decades-- 40,000 Hungarian refugees in the Fifties, 20,000 Czechs, Chileans and Ismailis in

the Sixties and Seventies and 100,000 Vietnamese in the Seventies and Eighties. The Syrians are generally a well-educated people and many would make successful immigrants in Canada.

Fifth, do nothing to legitimize Assad. Instead, we should be building cases against him and his fellow perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity for eventual prosecution by the International Criminal Court. If the Coalition out of fear of ISIS and of a desire to stop the Islamist extremist group were to ally itself *de facto* or *de jure* with Assad for fleeting tactical advantage, it would be the ultimate betrayal of the Syrian innocents. And of our own values.

The world can still save many lives in Syria. But to do so it will need to cure its collective myopia, retrieve its human solidarity from wherever it has misplaced it and generate the political will to do more than wring its already raw hands over the ongoing slaughter.